

Demystifying The CAGED System

Lesson Pack

Notes on the backing tracks

Key: E Minor

Form: A, B, C, A, B, C, B, C, C

A section: Em7 → Bm7 → Am7 → Am7 → Bm7 → Em7 → Bm7 → Am7 → Am7 → Am11

B section : Am7 → Bm7 → Am7 → Bm7

C section: Em7 → Bm7 → Cmaj7 → Bm7

Lesson Pack

The following exercises all have TAB and PDF to help guide you through them. Make sure you download the lesson pack to get a copy of the examples.

Mapping Major Chords

Start developing your fretboard map by using the CAGED system to map out the major chord shapes. Do this exercise in the key of C first, then repeat it with other keys to consolidate your understanding.

1. Find C on the low E, A and D strings
2. From the C on the A string play a C chord in the direction of the headstock, then a C chord in the direction of the body
3. From the C on the low E string play a C chord in the direction of the headstock, then a C chord in the direction of the body
4. From the C on the D string play a C chord in the direction of the headstock, then a C chord in the direction of the body
5. Repeat this process, working your way around the fretboard, moving from one C to another. Play both chord shapes on each landmark.

Mapping Minor Chords

Repeat the exercise for major chords using minor chords instead. You can find the minor chord shapes in the lesson pack download. Since the Cm and Gm shapes are very challenging it is ok to play just the lowest four notes of these chords. The minor CAGED shape diagrams are in the download.

Mapping the minor pentatonic scale

If you can comfortably find all the major and minor chord shapes in a few keys you are ready to try mapping the pentatonic scales. I recommend students start with the minor pentatonic scale as they are usually more familiar with it. As before start with one key and then repeat these exercises with other keys to consolidate your understanding. I like to do this in the key of A, make sure you start and end on the root note of the shape. Initially you should use the accompanying PDF of minor pentatonic shapes to help you learn how to play each shape.

Memorising the shapes

1. Find A on the low E string
2. Memorise the Em shape from this landmark
3. Memorise the Gm shape from this landmark
4. Find A on the A string (not the open string)
5. Memorise the Am shape from this landmark
6. Memorise the Cm shape from this landmark
7. Find A on the D string
8. Memorise the Dm shape from this landmark

Once you have memorised each shape and it's associated landmark you can start to become more familiar with each shape from an improvisational perspective. Try the following exercises. Don't try to switch shapes yet, we'll cover that in the next set of exercises.

1. Improvise a solo with the Em shape
2. Improvise a solo with the Gm shape
3. Improvise a solo with the Am shape
4. Improvise a solo with the Cm shape
5. Improvise a solo with the Dm shape
6. Take a lick you know and try find a way to play it in all five shapes

Repeat these exercises in a few keys to consolidate your understanding.

Moving between scale shapes

If you can improvise in each shape without too much difficulty you can then try connecting shapes together. We'll start by connecting the shapes that neighbour on the same landmark. Later we'll move onto connecting the whole CAGED network. See the TAB in the download for examples what this will look like.

Connecting the Em and Gm shapes who share their landmark on the low E string

1. Play up one shape, then slide along the high e string into the next shape, descend down the new shape. Practice this starting on both the Em the Gm shape
2. Repeat the above exercise slide on the b string, continue ascending the new scale as far as you can go, then descend down it
3. Repeat exercise 2 for the G, D, A and low E strings
4. Improvise with both shapes, slide between the scales when you feel like it.

Repeat the above exercises to connect the Am and Cm shapes, and the Em and Dm shapes.

Repeat the above exercises to connect the shapes that don't have a common land mark. These are the Dm and Cm shapes, and the Am and Gm shapes.

Now you should have your CAGED network connected in pairs. You should now start trying to improvise, moving between the shapes when you feel like. If you get lost, stop playing, look for your nearest landmark, re-establish yourself there, then keep improvising.

Mapping other scales

You can repeat all the exercises from the minor pentatonic scale with any other scale to integrate

it into your fretboard map. I have included diagrams for the major pentatonic scale in the download as this would be a sensible next choice for a student looking to take this further.